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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes the use of international media events as instructional tools in the basic college communications course. The international media event examined, as one such application, is the spring, 1989 student protests in China. This type of instructional tool offers an excellent means of integrating world events into the curriculum. As international trade and exchange continues to grow, it is increasingly important for students to be aware of other cultures and how they contrast with the United States on interpersonal, organizational, and societal levels. (Author/DB)

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USE OF INTERNATIONAL MEDIA EVENTS AS AN INSTRUCTIONAL TOOL IN THE BASIC COURSE: THE SPRING, 1989 PROTESTS IN CHINA AS PERCEPTION CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This paper promotes the use of international media events as an instructional tool in the basic course. The international media event examined, as one such application, is the spring, 1989 protests in China. It is analyzed as a perception case study. This type of instructional tool offers an excellent means of integrating world events into the curriculum. As international trade and exchange continues to grow it is increasingly important for students to be aware of other cultures and how they contrast with the U.S. on the interpersonal, organizational, and societal levels.

This paper was presented at the 1990 annual national meeting of the Speech Communication Association (Chicago, Illinois).

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USE OF INTERNATIONAL MEDIA EVENTS AS AN INSTRUCTIONAL TOOL IN THE BASIC COURSE: THE SPRING, 1989 PROTESTS IN CHINA AS PERCEPTION CASE STUDY

Since The People's Republic of China opened to the outside world in 1979, it has engaged in a variety of reforms to help it compete economically on the world market. A key problem for the government has centered on how to adopt economic reforms without adopting corresponding political reforms. Seeds of student unrest, regarding the lack of political reforms, were evidenced during student protests in winter, 1987. The protests were silenced but discontent with the small-scale political reforms persisted. Meanwhile significant economic reforms continued.

In spring, 1989 students mounted another protest in Tianemen Square (the public square in the capital city of Beijing) seeking democratic political reforms. Roughly 3,000 students engaged in a hunger strike that quickly gathered support from various segments of the Chinese population. Tianemen Square is the largest plaza in the world (roughly 100 acres) and, at times during the protest, held over one million people. Western media, in Beijing to report on the Gorbachev visit (and the significant Chinese-Soviet summit indicating normalization between the two communist superpowers), had a rare opportunity to cover the massive protest in China. The Gorbachev visit was quickly dwarfed as the uprising gained momentum throughout the country.

On June 3 the protest came to a bloody end when Chinese

troops killed an estimated 3,000 Chinese citizens in and around Tianemen Square. The military action received considerable condemnation worldwide. The following days saw random firing on Chinese citizens and foreigners in Beijing and overt intimidation of the Chinese population. The uprising, and especially the crackdown, is seen as a major setback for China.

This paper will emphasize use of international media events, such as the uprising in China, as an instructional tool in the basic course. Actual film footage, produced by western journalists reporting from China, can be used for case study analysis of perception concepts exemplified in the events reported. Perceptual processes can be recognized in the events and the reporting of events. The latter is especially fruitful for analysis. Regarding the Chinese protests, NBC News anchor Tom Brokaw stated "I think a big part of what people are looking for is context and perspective" (Collins & Donlon, 1989, p. 3D).

According to Devito (1989, pp. 38-41), perception is divided into three stages: 1) sensory stimulation occurs, 2) sensory stimulations are organized, and 3) sensory stimulations are interpreted and evaluated. Attribution, the process used to understand behaviors of others and attribute motivations for these behaviors, occurs in the third stage. Causality, internal and external, is a factor in this attribution process. American reporters, academic experts, and government representatives were caught off guard when the

protests quickly escalated. They could barely report the events, let alone speculate what might happen in the future. In this reporting of events much emphasis was given on what was happening and why it was happening. Thus, attribution for the behaviors reported became a primary element in news stories broadcast from China.

This particular case study examines the May 18, 1989 CBS News documentary 48 Hours. Analysis deals with the frustrations felt by western journalists as they worked to understand the series of events in China. Their confusion was conveyed directly and, at times, indirectly. A key objective for journalists was to convey the perceptual context of Chinese citizens so it was understandable to the U.S. perceptual context. News reports were frequently prefaced and concluded with disclaimers regarding the accuracy of their sources. Speculation was essential throughout the reporting. Thus, the role of perception was clearly evidenced and is suitable for analysis in the classroom.

The 48 Hours episode was entitled "China Rebellion." It was a live broadcast from Beijing, China and offered an excellent opportunity to watch the CBS News team present news with little preparation. The student protest had just spread to many other areas of the Chinese society and the ramifications of the events were major for China. "China Rebellion" featured six primary segments focusing on: 1) the hunger strike in Beijing, 2) individual hunger strikers, 3) a

political analysis & the goal of free speech, 4) hunger strikers in Shanghai, 5) Chinese students in the U.S. & an analysis by a China expert, and 6) a closing commentary by Charles Kuralt (a CBS journalist).

The author uses the case study approach in the basic course to enhance student learning of theory and application of theory. That is, he describes theoretical concepts and emphasizes student ability to apply or recognize the concepts in various contexts. In this particular case study perception theory is used. The following steps detail use of the 48 Hours "China Rebellion" episode.

1) Perception theory (as described earlier in this paper) is discussed in class. The stages of perception, attribution theory and the role of causality (internal and external) are stressed.

2) Students are assured they do not need to know anything about China to do well in their analysis. Observance of the 48 Hours episode will be sufficient.

3) Discussion of broadcast journalist objectives to report who, what, when, where, why, and how. This case study emphasizes the "what" secondarily and the "why" primarily.

4) Description of how CBS News journalists were in China to report on the Chinese-Soviet summit, the student protests occurred unexpectedly, many segments of the Chinese population joined in the uprising, and the uprising became far more important than the Chinese-Soviet summit. Journalists worked to report and interpret events as they

occurred.

5) Considerable cross-cultural interpretation was needed due to the differences between Chinese and American societies. For instance, China is communist controlled and uses a socialist economic system. The U.S. is governed through democracy and uses a capitalist economic system.

6) Cross-cultural interpretation requires emphasis on the perceptual bases of the compared cultures. Thus, the "why" aspect of reported events needs clarification.

7) Students observe the 48 Hours "China Rebellion" videotape and are instructed to answer three questions: 1) How do journalists explain what is happening, 2) How do journalists explain why it is happening, and 3) Are the protests a result of internal or external causality? Why? Their responses are presented in a 1-2 page reaction paper.

This type of case study approach can be used with a variety of theoretical concepts and international media events. The author chose this particular event because he was a visiting professor in Beijing, China in 1987 and his familiarity with China's modernization enhances his ability to understand responses on the subject. Use of the assignment has been beneficial and, in addition to the emphasis on perception, provides examples for reference during lectures on other topics.

Use of international media events as an instructional tool in the basic course is an excellent way to integrate

world events into the curriculum. As international trade and exchange continues to grow it is increasingly important for students to be aware of other cultures and how they contrast with the U.S. on the interpersonal, organizational, and societal levels. This type of assignment enhances such awareness.

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